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Belarus: Treatment of members of the Greek Rite Catholic Church in Belarus by government and non-government agents and availability of state protection (2002 - 2005)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Although freedom of religion is enshrined in the Belarusian Constitution, the Government "restricts this right in practice" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; US May 2005, 84). In 2002, the government adopted a "highly repressive" (*FSU Monitor* 1 Nov. 2002) religion law that places restrictions on minority religious communities while recognizing the central role of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) (AP 9 Aug. 2002; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2) and the historical importance of "traditional faiths" in Belarusian society (ibid.). The Greek Rite Catholic Church (also called the Uniate Church), established in Belarus in the sixteenth century (ibid.; RFE/RL 2005), is not recognized as one of these "traditional faiths" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). The Belarusian government has identified these "traditional faiths" as Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, Sunni Islam, and Evangelical Lutheranism (ibid.). Belarusian government Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

There are reports that non-Orthodox groups experience "harassment" (US May 2005) and "persecut[ion]" by the authorities (US May 2005, 84). The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) continues to harass, fine, or detain adherents of various denominations, including the Greek Rite Catholic Church (US May 2005, 84).

The Greek Rite Catholic Church has been "persecuted" by the authorities due to the Church's use of the Belarusian language in its religious activities (US May 2005, 84). The Church is not a favored BOC" (*Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 2.c). The Church is not registered in the country, Church communities are not permitted to rent property to create places of worship (US May 2005, 85; Forum 18 8 Oct. 2003). In Minsk, a private house and turned it into a church (US May 2005, 84).

The 2002 religion law prevents the Greek Catholic Church from being able to establish monasteries in Belarus, since it does not qualify as a "Republican" (i.e., national-level) organization (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; Forum 18 16 Dec. 2004; UN 15 Mar. 2005, 10). The Church does not qualify because its leader is not a citizen of Belarus, its parishes have been established only since 1990 (Forum 18 16 Dec. 2004), and its headquarters are located in the Vatican and not in Belarus (ibid. 30 Oct. 2003).

The inability to qualify as a central organization also prevents the Greek Catholic Church from having its own media publications and from inviting non-Belarusians to the country to participate in the Church's religious activities (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; Forum 18 16 Dec. 2004; *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 2.c).

No further information on the treatment of members of the Greek Rite Catholic Church in Belarus by government and non-government agents, and availability of state protection to these members, could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral Source: International Christian Concern (ICC) did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), Charter 97, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Factiva, Freedom House, International Christian Concern (ICC), Minority Rights Group International (MRG), Prima News Agency, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, World News Connection.

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